

THE BEWICK WREN IN THE DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA, WITH A DESCRIPTION OF ITS SONG.

BY ARTHUR H. HOWELL AND HENRY OLDYS.

THE Bewick Wren (*Thryomanes bewicki*) has for some years been known as a rare visitant in the District of Columbia, occurring mainly during the spring migration (April). Since Mr. Ridgway's published records of its occurrence here¹ it has been noted a number of times by various observers, and during the seasons of 1905 and 1906 we secured evidence of its probable breeding within our limits.

A single bird was observed at Petworth (a suburb of Washington) on April 29, 1905, our attention having been called to its song by Mrs. Arthur Brown, who said the bird had been living in the near vicinity of her house for several weeks. It was noted by her many times during the spring of 1905, but disappeared in July to reappear, however, in April of the following year. On June 2, 1906, we visited the locality and spent several hours watching the wren and listening to its varied and attractive song. The bird was restless and very active, choosing usually for its perches some high and exposed situation, such as the pinnacle of a roof or cupola, or a dead branch on some large tree. After singing for a short time from one of its perches it would fly to another some distance away, and at once sing again, but it remained constantly within an area of not more than four or five acres. Its beat included several suburban streets and a number of houses, but was surrounded on three sides by open fields and woodland.

We heard the bird again later in the month (June) but at no time did we find a nest or even a mate — if it had one. Following is a list of all the records of this species in the vicinity of Washington that we have been able to secure, most of them kindly furnished by Dr. Charles W. Richmond:—

April 10, 1882.	Arlington, Virginia.	Specimen taken by Wm. Palmer.
April 6, 1883	“ “	“ “ “ “ “ “
April 8, 1888.	Washington, D. C.	“ “ “ M. M. Green.
April 22, 1888.	“ “	One seen by “ “

¹ Auk, IX, 1902, p. 307.

Nov. 24, 1889.	Four Mile Run, Virginia.	Specimen (♀ ad.) taken by J. D. Figgins.
Dec. 22, 1890.	Washington, D. C.	One seen by Chas. W. Richmond.
March 26, 1897.	“ “	Specimen taken by Jas. H. Gaut.
April 5, 1892.	Brookland, D. C.	One seen by Robt. Ridgway.
April 4, 1894.	“ “	“ “ “ “ “ “
April 5, 1906.	“ “	“ “ “ “ “ “
April 29, 1905.	Petworth, “	“ “ “ “ A. H. Howell.
June 2, 1906.	“ “	“ “ “ “ Howell & Oldys.

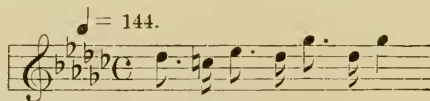
The following account of the singing of the wren is based on material secured on the occasion of our joint visit to the locality on June 2. The notations were made from the songs as they were delivered and were verified from subsequent repetitions of the phrases uttered.

The first song heard was made up of equal parts of the Grasshopper Sparrow's buzz and the Chipping Sparrow's rapid repetition of one note. Taken as a whole the song was somewhat suggestive of that of a Chewink. After repeating this strain for a while, the bird changed to the following song, delivered in the voice of a Field Sparrow:



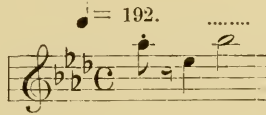
The opening notes were two (sometimes one) introductory squeaks, that suggested the idea of sounds made by the vocal machinery in starting. The next three were clear and resembled the beginning of the song of a Song Sparrow, though clearer than is usual with the Song Sparrow. The closing note was a rapid repetition of a single tone (indicated by the dotted line above), in quality and character hardly distinguishable from the usual closing note of a Chewink.

After one or two other changes of theme the wren, with delightful versatility, swung into a charming little song, which began with a melodious arrangement of clear notes marked by an attractive rhythm, very unusual, if not unique, among birds:

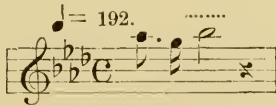


No sufficient opportunity offered to write the rest of the song on the staff, but the three notes with which it closed may be indicated by the syllables '*sweet, sweet, sweet,*' uttered rather rapidly.

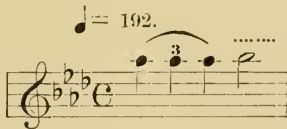
This song bore no resemblance to that of any other bird in this region, and was probably the wren's own. But that the Bewick Wren is an excellent mimic, was very palpably shown by the individual bird under consideration. The possession of an imitative faculty was indicated by the first songs noted; but before the interview was over the bird gave unquestionable proof of its powers by directly imitating the songs of a Chewink and a Field Sparrow that were singing near by, following each song by those birds with an imitation of it. The mimicry was mainly in quality of voice and style of theme, though the intervals used by the chewink and the sparrow were fairly closely followed by the wren. Thus when the chewink sang —



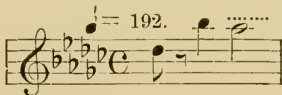
the wren responded with —



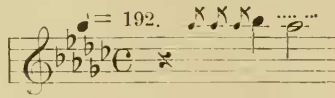
or sometimes $\frac{1}{m}$



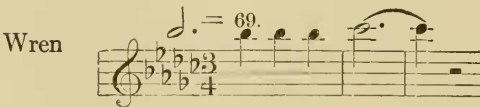
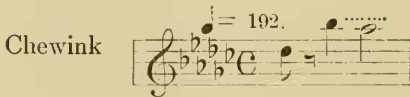
And when the Chewink changed to —



the wren altered its theme to correspond, thus:



Sometimes, however, the answering was supplemental, instead of imitative, thus —



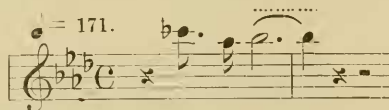
The Field Sparrow song, which occurred later, consisted of the following, with a few added, less important, notes —



As in the case of the chewink song the wren had two replies to this. The first was a nearly exact reproduction of the Field Sparrow's notes, though with a different tempo —



The second was, as in the second rejoinder to the chewink, rather more supplemental in character —



As far as may be safely permitted by this limited, but satisfactory, observation, the Bewick Wren must be accorded high rank as a singer.¹ Its voice has not the ringing quality of that of the Carolina Wren, nor are its notes always as pure. But though less brilliant in tone than the Carolina Wren and less energetic in style than either that singer or the non-musical House Wren, the Bewick Wren has a sweetness of voice and an ease of delivery that are very attractive, while in versatility it far excels either of the others. And the single song heard that appeared to be its own, uninfluenced by those of other birds, is of a higher order in its musical construction than the simple themes of the Carolina Wren (the House Wren's voluble utterance, though pleasant to hear, bears no resemblance to human music).

In imitative ability the Bewick Wren has, apparently, no rival among our eastern birds other than the Mockingbird, by which, however, it is greatly excelled. The Carolina Wren and Brown Thrasher seldom imitate other birds, despite a popular belief to the contrary, and the few imitations they give are delivered in their own quality of voice — translations into their own tongue, so to speak. The Catbird attempts imitation more frequently than Thrasher or Carolina Wren, but also renders imitated songs in its own tongue and often merely mingles bits of mimicry with its own disconnected, ejaculatory phrases. The Chat sometimes, though rarely, reproduces other birds' songs fairly well, and a few more birds show traces of the faculty;² but none of these is to be compared with the Bewick Wren. The latter, during the short period of observation under consideration gave a number of imitations and not only reproduced notes uttered by other birds in the vicinity but performed the more difficult feat of reproducing with a considerable degree of exactness the quality of tone in which they were uttered. It seems to be better entitled to the sobriquet of 'Mocking Wren,' than the Carolina Wren, on which the name is sometimes inappropriately bestowed.

¹ I have listened many times to the songs of the Texan Bewick Wren, whose musical talents apparently are fully equal to those of the eastern subspecies. The songs given by the Texas birds resembled in form and tone quality the finest song heard from the Petworth Wren, and there was an almost endless variety in the construction of the songs.—A. H. H.

² I have even heard the English Sparrow give an excellent reproduction of the Carolina Wren's musical alarm note.—H. O.